Power relations and hierarchies in higher music education institutions

A report for the Power relations in Higher Music Education network (PRiHME) at the Association of European Conservatoires, September 2021, Dr Anna Bull, University of York

Introduction

This report introduces the concepts of **power relations and hierarchies** in higher music education institutions. It then explores how these intersect with **social inequalities** and are reproduced through **invisible practices**. Finally, it outlines **challenges and ways forward** for addressing them. Due to my research expertise, it focuses primarily on examples relating to classical music in the UK. However, these examples may be helpful for thinking about similarities and differences across genres and national contexts.

Before introducing these concepts, we will start with an example. In research with young classical musicians in England[1], a few students mentioned bullying behaviour they had experienced from music teachers. These behaviours included getting angry at the student for their lack of progress, shouting at them, making them cry, and humiliating them in front of others. For example, one student, Jonathan[2] described his first year at a conservatoire:

> I had a really tough first year actually, I had a real bastard of a teacher. He really, really broke me. But I persevered, and I do actually appreciate him breaking me down. I needed to have that humility brought to me, so I could realise this is where I am, and I have this potential to be a lot better than what I think I am, so whilst it did depress me, I persevered.

Jonathan did not label this behaviour as bullying. He describes how his teacher 'broke' him and 'knocked him down', but he says he is grateful that his 'bastard of a teacher' acted this way, even though he became depressed due to these experiences. In common with the other students in this research who described problematic behaviour from music teachers, Jonathan did not see this behaviour as wrong. Instead, all these students thought that their teachers were right to behave in this way because they (the students) weren't good enough musicians, weren't working hard enough, or weren't mature enough.

These accounts raise questions. Why did these students think that it was normal for their teachers to behave in this way? Why did the teachers think this was acceptable? Did other staff and students – such as faculty, administrators, managers, support staff – know about and accept these behaviours? And if these behaviours were seen as normal, would worse behaviours also be accepted as normal?

This report explores the cultures that enables such behaviours to occur, starting by introducing the context in which they occur: hierarchies of value in higher music education.

Hierarchies of value in higher music education

Hierarchies within institutions and within society can take different forms. One way that hierarchies work is to create a shared understanding of who is valuable and who is less valuable within an institution or a society. In music education, hierarchies of value can be based on real or perceived differences. These differences can be examined on three levels:

1. Wider **social inequalities or differences** ('macro' level)
    - These include gender, class, race, disability, nationality, sexuality, gender identity, age
        - An example is prestigious leadership positions such as conducting being predominantly taken up by men.
2. **Status and role within the institution** ('meso' level)

[1] Bull, Anna. 2019. *Class, Control and Classical Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[2] All names have been changed to protect anonymity

- These include level of study (first year, postgraduate); being given awards or prizes within the institution; status as a staff member or student, or as permanent or part-time; department; instrument and genre of music studied
    - An example is some instruments being valued more than others, for example, if piano students are given more prestigious performance opportunities than brass students.

3. **Inter-personal or individual differences** ('micro' level)
    - These include being labelled as 'talented' by a teacher; being confident, charismatic or funny; or taking an informal leadership role.
        - An example might be the seating order of players in the orchestra (with the 'best' players being in the top positions).

These three levels are not separate from one another. For example, status within the institution is easier to achieve for some social groups than others, such as white people or men. This means that **hierarchies of musical ability – 'talent' or 'ability' – are not fully objective criteria** but are based on judgements that may be influenced by hierarchies of value.

In my research, **music students usually supported and agreed with the hierarchies within classical music education**. They thought that the system was fair and they wanted to be rewarded for their hard work. They tended to have a deep sense of trust in their teachers and thought that teachers' judgements about students' ability were accurate, for example in ranking them for orchestral places. In fact, teaching or administrative staff who tried to bring about changes sometimes found these resisted by students[3].

However, these hierarchies of value can have negative effects on students who are devalued. In Perkins' study of a music conservatoire in England, she found there was **a 'star' system in which some students were valued more than others**. As a result, students were not only learning their instrument, they were also 'learning where they fit in conservatoire hierarchies'[4]. One student in Perkins' study, Fay, described how the sense of 'hierarchy and competition' led to her 'just feeling cast aside, and also not helped or supported'. She thought that these hierarchies were fixed early on:

> I think it's immediately decided as soon as you enter, what you're going to become. And maybe they're right, and maybe they're wrong, but there is definitely a sense that you've got your place, you've got your role.

These examples draw on classical music institutions and practices. In the UK, the hierarchy of cultural value favours classical music over other genres[5]. However, in jazz education in Sweden, similar patterns are visible to classical music, in that class background affects entry into higher education as well as instrument choice[6]. Hierarchies of what and who is valued may vary across genres, for example, in popular music studies or traditional music.

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[3] See also Geoff Baker's account of attempts at progressive change in a music education programme in Colombia (open access book): Baker, Geoffrey. 2020 *Rethinking Social Action through Music: The Search for Coexistence and Citizenship in Medellín's Music Schools*. Open Book Publishing https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0243.

[4] Perkins, Rosie. 2013. 'Hierarchies and Learning in the Conservatoire: Exploring What Students Learn through the Lens of Bourdieu'. *Research Studies in Music Education* 35 (2): 197–212. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X13508060. P.208. See also: Perkins, Rosie. 2011. 'The Construction of "Learning Cultures": An Ethnographically-Informed Case Study of a UK Conservatoire'. Cambridge.

[5] Bull, Anna, and Christina Scharff. 2017. '"McDonalds" Music' Versus "Serious Music": How Production and Consumption Practices Help to Reproduce Class Inequality in the Classical Music Profession'. *Cultural Sociology* 11 (3): 283–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517711045.

[6] Nylander, E., & Melldahl, A. (2015). Playing with capital: Inherited and acquired assets in a jazz audition. *Poetics*, *48*, 83–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2014.12.002

How social inequalities shape hierarchies

As this quote from Fay shows, hierarchies can create a culture where some students are not supported to learn and progress. These hierarchies of value may be based in part on perceived musical proficiency, but they are also based on other factors. These include **social capital**, i.e. social networks with those in positions of power, and **symbolic cultural capital** or prestige[7]. These hierarchies are also shaped by wider social inequalities, such as those of gender, class, race, or disability. For example, in some music education institutions, stereotypes exist about East Asian heritage classical musicians, such as myths that they are not as 'musical' as white European students[8]. These stereotypes are based on wider social hierarchies in which whiteness is valued over other racialized identities.

Staff/faculty are also affected by these hierarchies and inequalities. In conservatoires in the UK, positions of prestige and authority – such as conductors, music directors, or conservatoire teaching staff – are more likely to be held by men than women. Less prestigious roles – such as teaching outside of conservatoires – are more likely to be held by women[9]. Therefore, **the belief that talent and hard work will be rewarded is at odds with the reality that some groups are more likely to be in prestigious roles than others.**

As well as hierarchies of value relating to social inequalities, **there also exist hierarchies within, and between, musical genres.** Classical music – and the skills, knowledge, repertoire, and instruments associated with it – is often seen as more valuable than other genres. For example, in the UK, classical music is given substantially more state funding than other genres[10]. This can lead to skills, knowledge, repertoire or instruments associated with other genres being less valued within institutions.

Even within a genre, there can also be hierarchies of value of instruments, or subgenres. For example, an orchestral career might be seen as more valuable than being a piano accompanist or a teacher[11]. These hierarchies can lead to some types of music – and some musicians – being seen as more valuable than others.

Understanding power relations

These hierarchies and inequalities shape power relations in higher music education. It is helpful to talk about '**power relations'** rather than simply 'power'. This means that, rather than power being possessed by some people and not others, power *relations* are created through shared ideas of what is 'normal', through invisible practices (as discussed below). As a result, **power relations can make us want to do certain things rather than others**. This also means that power can have both positive and negative effects at the same time. An example of power relations can be seen in this interview with two singers talking about the conductor of their choir:

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[7] Perkins, 2013, p.207

[8] See for example: Yang, M. (2007). East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism. *Asian Music*, *38*(1), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1353/amu.2007.0025

[9] Scharff, Christina. 2017. *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work: The Classical Music Profession*. London: Routledge; Scharff, Christina. 2015. 'Equality and Diversity in the Classical Music Profession'. Kings College London. http://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/young-female-and-entrepreneurial/files/2014/02/Equality-and-Diversity-in-the-Classical-Music-Profession.pdf. Patterns of inequalities for both staff and students across all institutions within higher music education in the UK will be addressed in the forthcoming EDIMS network research report; see further information at https://www.edimusicstudies.com/working-groups

[10] Bull and Scharff '"McDonalds" Music' Versus "Serious Music"

[11] Bull, A., & Scharff, C. (2021). Classical music as genre: Hierarchies of value within freelance classical musicians' discourses. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211006094

> Katherine: I like it that he's so demanding, he pushes us. […] He's just so good at hearing the holistic sound, the overall sound, but actually knowing what everyone's voice... *he knows* who is not quite there.
>
> Hannah: *He knows* what needs to be done to get the blend perfect.
>
> Katherine: And *he knows* exactly who it is that isn't quite with it. And that can be quite...
>
> Hannah: Scary!
>
> Katherine: Intimidating, at times, because you know, you know if you're tired or something, you know that he will have heard it.

In this quote, the feeling of being watched – one way in which power relations operate – makes Hannah and Katherine hyper-aware of their own errors because they think their conductor will notice. In this way, the power relations between these singers and their conductor influence their music-making in subtle but powerful ways. Hannah and Katherine describe this relation of power with their conductor as positive – he pushes them to do their best – but at the same time, as intimidating and scary. This example shows how **it is important to understand power relations not solely as repressive or negative**. Instead, they can be experienced in complex ways, including as pleasurable or exciting[12].

The relations of power in this example are shaped by inequalities of age, gender, expertise, and institutional role. In relation to **age**, their conductor is significantly older than them and this contributes to an unequal dynamic. There is also the potential for unequal power relations based on **gender**; as noted above, men are much more likely than women to hold positions of power in music, and in wider society. On the institutional level, his **expertise** also, in this instance, forms a relation of inequality. His expertise gives him more value than the young singers. And finally, his **institutional role** confers authority on him. The institution has designated him as someone who is entitled to speak and be listened to. Not only that, he is being paid to be there while Hannah and Katherine are both *paying* fees to participate in the choir. These structural and institutional inequalities are shaping the experience of power relations that Hannah and Katherine describe between themselves and their conductor.

On top of these structural and institutional factors that shape the power relations between conductor and singers in this group, there are also **interpersonal factors that contribute to relations of power**. For example, **charisma** is a form of interpersonal power. As Nisbett and Walmsley have suggested[13], charismatic leadership in the arts can 'supplant ethics, strategy and reason' and therefore we should be wary of it. As such, while charisma can help to produce brilliant musical experiences, it can also be a form of power that leads to people accepting unethical or problematic behaviour.

Power relations are not just present between people, but they also **contribute to forming people's identity and their sense of self.** In this quote, a young woman, Megan, explains how her relationship with her singing teacher shaped her sense of self:

> I wouldn't be the person I [am] without my singing lessons [...] you go on such a personal journey with [your teacher] [...], they craft *you*. It feels like she crafted me around my voice in my singing lessons [...] I think I totally trusted her, trusted her judgement, trusted how she

[12] Reitsamer, R., Prokop, R., & Bull, A. (Under review). *Power Relations in Higher Music Education: Using Foucault to Theorise Teachers' and Students' Experiences of the Master-Apprentice Model*.

[13] Nisbett, Melissa, and Ben Walmsley. 2016. 'The Romanticization of Charismatic Leadership in the Arts'. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 46 (1): 1–11.

> was teaching me. […] I can't regret those lessons because I can't think of how I would be if I hadn't had them.

This quote shows how Megan's relationship with her teacher made her into the person she is. This is an example of power relations that are positive and enable Megan to do things she would not have been able to otherwise. Overall, rather than aiming to create a culture where power does not exist, it is important to explore how it can work in positive, rather than oppressive, ways.

Invisible practices

Rather than being clearly visible, many of the hierarchies and relations of power described above are produced through invisible practices. One way of describing these invisible practices is the 'hidden curriculum' of music education. The hidden curriculum is:

> The **unstated norms, values and beliefs** that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both **the formal content** as well as **the social relations** of school and classroom life[14].

The formal content refers to *what* is being taught (repertoire, knowledge). The 'social relations' refer to relationships between people, such as the hierarchies and inequalities described above. In the example of the choir conductor, above, the social relations reveal one aspect of the 'hidden curriculum': the belief that hierarchy and authority are essential for excellence in musical performance in classical music.

In order to make these invisible practices and the 'hidden curriculum' of music education visible, it is important to seek out the voices of people who are not usually heard within the organisation. One example of this can be seen in the quotes above: young women's perspectives are not usually sought, and they are likely to present a very different view of power relations and hierarchies to those in positions of power. Indeed, people in positions of power may not recognise that they are exerting power. Instead, **relations of power may only be apparent to those who are positioned as powerless within the institution** or interaction.

Challenges and ways forward

To return to the example from the start of this report, **one reason for addressing power relations in higher music education is to prevent abuses of power such as bullying and harassment**. Professor Liz Kelly has described how some environments create a 'conducive context' where abuses of power are more likely to occur. 'Conducive contexts' tend to have 'institutionalised power and authority that creates a sense of entitlement, to which there [is], limited external challenge'[15]. The power and authority that can exist in higher music education institutions can contribute to creating a conducive context for abuses of power to occur. Indeed, a recent report from the Royal Academy of Music[16] in London described a 'culture of fear' within the institution. In this 'culture of fear', students were too scared to speak up about sexual harassment by staff members.

This culture is not an inevitable part of music education. Instead, it is produced (in part) by power relations and hierarchies. Our challenge is to first make these power relations and hierarchies visible, and then to challenge them.

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[14] Giroux, Henry A., and Anthony N. Penna. 2012. 'Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum'. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, July. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00933104.1979.10506048.

[15] Kelly, Liz. 2013. 'A Conducive Context: Trafficking of Persons in Central Asia'. In *Human Trafficking*, edited by Maggy Lee. London: Willan Publishing,. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843924555-9.

[16] Kopelman, Peter, Maureen Boylan, and Rebecca Kashti. 2020. 'Review of Safeguarding Arrangements'. Royal Academy of Music, University of London. https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/whitespace-ram/production/Review-of-Safeguarding-Arrangements.pdf.